DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 191 UD 024 764

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TITLE Stereotype and Identity: The Italian Case.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Biographies; Ethnic Groups; *Ethnicity; *Immigrants; *Italian Americans; Oral History; Personal Narratives; Research Methodology; *Research Needs; *Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *Immigration; *Italians

ABSTRACT

When analyzing the question of ehtnic identity, it is crucial to pay attention to oral history and biographical material: ethnicity is not so much a collective phenomenon as an individual one. For example, much has been written about Italian migration to the United States, but the lives of the ordinary immigrants and the rich detail of their varied experiences have been relatively ignored. We know that emigration from Italy was affected by prevailing economic, political, and social conditions, but how did the individuals themselves respond to these forces? If poverty was a major cause, why did the individual and family choose to go to America? How did the immigrant respond to the rigors of the transplantation? Only a thorough review of immigrant writings and corollary material would provide a direct answer to these and other questions. Moreover, such a study would certainly redress the stereotypes about "happy, singing Italians" that have influenced much of the research literature. Although personal narratives about the Italian immigrant experience are limited in number, the writings of Carmine Iannace, Mario Puzo, Guiseppe Prezzolini, Camillo Cianfarra, William Murray, (which are excerpted in this document) and other Italian or Italian-American writers could be studied further. (KH)

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STEREOTYPE AND IDENTITY

The Italian Case

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Much has been written about Italian migration to the United States. Numerous works have studied the movement from a number of perspectives. There have been statistical analyses as well as historical surveys and case studies of Italian colonial life. Sentimental and success stories are common, in addition to studies critical of the American response to the immigrants. Works on the adjustment of the Italian to America have been typically from the point of view of the host society and have relied mostly on American sources and have used as criteria American institutional standards. Taken together, this literature represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of Italian immigration.

The effect, however, has tended to be one-sided: we know more about the way in which others view the Italians than the way the Italians view themselves and each other. Because the search for the large-scale generalization and the emphasis on the examination of general trends and processes have been given preference, the lives of the ordinary immigrants and the rich detail of their varied experiences have been relatively ignored. When the level of the analysis shifts downward to the individual it becomes possible to gather the more mundane information that is of interest in itself and that can also serve to more broadly illuminate the overall picture. The experiences of the migrant are far from obvious and need to be examined closely. We know that outmigration from Italy after 1860 was affected by the economic, political and social conditions of that new nation. But how did the individual himself respond to these forces that were swirling about him? Did he perceive them at all? To what extent were the reasons for leaving Italy of a purely personal nature? If poverty was a major cause or the lure of wealthy America, how were these (objective) conditions evaluated at the subjective level by the individual? by his family? Why did America become the destination and not another country? What were the immigrant perceptions of the people they met in America, Italians and others? How did the Italians judge the American value

system? How did the immigrant respond to the rigors of the transplantation from Italy to America? to immigrant work? to exploitation? What comparisons were made between life in Italy and the American adventure? Why did some choose to remain while others went back, periodically or permanently?

To address these questions directly, one needs to get as close as possible to the immigrant personality. This can be done by a thorough review of immigrant writings and corollary material. It has been said that, for all intents and purposes, this literature does not exist because of the paucity of first-person interpreters of Italian migration. Most of these immigrants, it is believed, could neither write nor express themselves. They not only lacked imagination and insight into their conditions, they also had no desire to dredge up the painful memories of their early immigrant years. It is true that the first-person literature is not voluminous, but it is not true that it does not exist or that because it is so personalized little of consequence can be derived from it. Ordinary immigrants were literate. Large numbers of these individuals could read and write. Italian colony newspapers were being read by someone. Official literacy rates by region of Italy are not good indicators. Many gained a measure of literacy in Italy and continued to hone it in America, or they acquired education here. And the question of immigration was for many an issue in which they had an important stake; its complexities were fully appreciated. The immigrant was as capable as any social worker or academic of accurately interpreting his American journey. There were those who produced written documents, published and unpublished, of various kinds. There are autobiographies, diaries, letters, interviews, a large number of Italian colony newspapers and pamphlets, and writings by Italian officials and travelers to America, which are all excellent sources of the everyday life of the immigrant. Such works have existed for decades but they have not always been systematically exploited for the purpose of developing immigrant perspectives. Some of the newer material that has come to light in recent years represents perhaps even more valuable sources than the older works.[1]

After all, who could better tell us about the life of the immigrant than the immigrant himself? Few general works have given a sense of what the immigrant was feeling and thinking, of what it was like to be transplanted from the Old World, where the philosophy of Destina reigned, to the New World, where a revolution of rising expectations was in full blossom. One wonders what those Italians who arrived at the turn of the century would think if they were to read what has been written and what is believed about them. They certainly would have difficulty recognizing themselves. The myths have been so carefully constructed and are so comforting to us that we probe their validity only with great reluctance.

From the immigrant we can get a glimpse of how he responded on an everyday level to his America, the America of the Italian labor gang, the America of the Italian colony, America as perceived by someone located in the lower socio-economic classes, looking up from the bottom. The world of the Italian immigrant was confined and circumscribed. He was hemmed in by his lack of job mobility, his ignorance of theAmerican language and culture, and his confusion as to his own identity. His world was closed: the outsiders were closed out and the insiders closed in. His experiences did not extend beyond the confines of his neighborhood, or his paesani peers, or the end of his shovel. The Italians had to decide, in their America of minimal opportunity, whether the gains that they might realize from migration outweighed the losses. They were despised by the natives and other immigrants, exploited by employers, and surrounded by an atmosphere of violence and alienation, and extreme, painful solitude. Their America, the America of the Mediterranean migrant, they quickly discovered, was the America of the "disposable" unskilled laborer, where filth, abuse, poverty, inequality, and insecurity were constant companions. The immigrant experience conditioned their thinking. What could they do to better their existences? Often very little. As Carmine Iannace wrote in his memoirs about those days, "I did what I had to do and accepted everything for what it was."[2]

Popular myth would have us believe that the Italians are an earthy, sensuous people, caring and warm in their social relationships, a people in love with good food and festive occasions -- in brief, molto simpatico.

Such distortions about Italians abound, and they are as likely to be committed by the experts in the field as the man on the street. One analyst goes as far as to assign to Italian Americans certain qualities that they presumably all possess.

> At the risk of caricaturing Italian American culture, one can catalog what appear to be its salient qualities: the obligation of loyalty to family and friends; the emphasis on domesticity (enjoyment of the home and family); the dominant role of the male; the importance of cutting a fine figure; the overflowing hospitality; the passion for good food and drink; and the respect for authority figures.

Not only does he risk caricaturing Italian American culture, he succeeds admirably in doing so. What the writer accomplishes is to affirm about Italians those platitudes that non-Italians want to believe or willingly believe. Even if true, are they special or limited to Americans of Italian descent? Surely these qualities are found in abundance elsewhere. The writer does more than to prolong the discussion of these wooden cliches; he goes on to imply that they resist acculturation, that these qualities are relatively immune to the onslaught of Americanism and the leveling process of the Melting Pot, for he concludes the paragraph by saying, "If these values are particularly characteristic of blue collar Italian Americans, they have not disappeared from the behavior of middle-class ethnics. While the more colorful expressions of this lifestyle may be attenuated among the upwardly mobile who self-consciously seek to behave 'properly,' one often finds the ethnic pattern of emotional response not far beneath the surface."[3] It might be as easily argued that these are not Italian ethnic values, but rather that they are better understood as sturdy all-American

working class values, which become radically attenuated once one "ascends" to the particularistic and individualistic middle class, where obligation to oneself supercedes obligation to others.

The Italian novelist Ignazio Silone was looking much deeper when he observed that "There are no sadder people than those gay Italians."

Perhaps initially there were those who came to America who had warm, endearing traits, but much effort was required to remain that way. Migration for the Italian was a complex experience, ambiguous and problematic, containing a crosshatch of dilemmas and frustrations that were seldom fully resolved. Even when "voluntary," migration was in the final analysis often a forced choice brought about by personal conflicts. The stigma of failure followed these migrants across the Atlantic; their departures indicated to others their inability to succeed on their own home ground. Once in America the immigrant encountered a world that was harsh, demanding, unyielding and unrewarding. An adjustment to immigrant life could be made only after great sacrifice to one's character and personality. Mario Puzo, in his thoughtful essay, "Choosing a Dream," describes the result. The Italians he knew "were a grim lot, always shouting, always angry, quicker to quarrel than embrace." What he recalls are cruel, gossiping and vindicative persons, living in a cruel and vindicative environment, who never had a kind or supportive word for anyone and whose good deeds were as rare as miracles. How could it be otherwise given their immigrant status? "As a child and in my adolescence," Puzo continues, "living in the heart of New York's Neapolitan ghetto, I never heard an Italian singing. None of the grownups I knew were charming or loving or understanding. Rather they seemed coarse, vulgar, and insulting. And so later in life when I was exposed to all the cliches of lovable Italians, singing Italians, happy-go-lucky Italians, I wondered where the hell the moviemakers and story writers got all their ideas from." Not from the immigrants, that is certain.

If the Italians were not ready for the America they discovered, the Americans were even less prepared for what they suddenly found in their midst. The mighty American industrial machine sought sinewy arms and sturdy backs to build the economic infrastructure. America did not bargain for the entire body and all that went with it. Dirty, unkempt foreigners, with strange odors, who ate exotic foods, looking and acting aboriginal, converged on the Republic. There had been no preparation. If the transatlantic mass migration had been planned and guided and regulated by both countries, then the adjustments might have been easier, the mutilation of the immigrant personality less frequent, the savagery less evident. The immigrants were largely on their own. They had to carve out a place for themselves in a hostile world. That the casualties were not greater than they were amazed Giuseppe Prezzolini. It is a wonder, he noted, that every Italian immigrant did not become a "delinquent or go insane. Those who did not must certainly be considered saints."[4]

"Gli emigranti hanno il corpo in America e la testa in Italia," many Italian visitors observed. The Italian was in America but his sentiments often remained in Italy. The "pull" of Italy remained very much in evidence. An Italian migration analyst insisted that, "no matter how Americanized the immigrant may become, he will never forget his paese to which he forever remains very much attached."[5] Diomede Carito spoke to a Lucanese immigrant in New York City in 1910, who told him: "Dottore, we carried over with us only our brains and our muscle; our hearts remain in the hovels where we lived in bella Italia."[6] The unsettling nature of this condition caused some Italians to return to Italy. Wanting to resolve in one way or another the dilemma that tortured their minds, they found instead that returning home often worsened the problem. By coming to America, the Italian had made himself into a hybrid, an hyphenated person, an Italian-American. The term was more than a convenient designation. It signified both a social condition and a state of being, setting the immigrant adrift and away from the mainstreams of both America and Italy. The immigrants

were cognizant of this dilemma. Carmine Iannace felt that he was living a "double life," la mia doppia vita -- "not two distinct lives but two overlapping seamless lives." Carlo Provone confronted the immigrant's dilemma when he returned home in 1910 after four years in the South Bronx. Many of the notations in his diary, which he began keeping after he left home, point to his own confusion as to his proper place. And he discovered that other repatriated Italians shared his feelings. "Every conversation I have in the bars eventually focuses on America. Those who have migrated are pulled in two opposing directions. Those of us who are here and have been there want to return, while those who are there always think of home. What can be done? Living in Italy is difficult for someone who has been elsewhere, yet it remains the country of our birth and the locus of our emotions."

Those who sought to establish or reestablish a single and cohesive identity either in Italy or America, were thwarted by their immigrant status, which was almost impossible to shed. Once the migrant left Italy he was no longer Italian and no matter how long he resided in America he was never accepted as an American. Antonio Margariti was reminded of this many times. "When I am in America," he observed in his sensitive and personal memoir, "I am considered an Italian. When I go to Italy I am referred to as an American."[7]

Camillo Cianfarra, a journalist who settled in New York, had no illusions about his immigrant status. He knew that it was immutable. "We will one day launch our children into the world of the real America. But for us, for the adults, we can never enter."[8]

William Murray, who had an Italian mother, describes the moment when he began to comprehend what life had been for her and, by extension, for other Italian immigrants. They were chatting with a friend one day when the question of Italians in the United States came up.

> "It does not matter," my mother said quietly. "The important thing is to feel American."

"Of course, darling," the friend said, "but you can't really be American. You have to be born here to be one."

"No," my mother said, "I'm as American as you are."

"Of course you aren't," I said, "How can you be? It's another way of thinking entirely."

My mother got up and left the room. I rushed out to find her.

"It's very hard, Bill," my mother said. "It's very hard not belonging anywhere. The distances are hard and the people are hard."[9]

When it comes to the question of ethnic identity, it seems to me that biographical material of this kind must be an essential component of any analysis. Without such an approach we will be prone to oversubscribe to a syndrome of characteristics that will do no more than harden old stereotypes, produce new ones, and put into deep shadow the many distinctions to be found in the conceptualization of ethnic identity.

Ethnicity, I would argue, is not so much a collective phenomenon as an individual one. While I can appreciate that my ethnic identity is what others tell me it is, I can also appreciate that it is significantly what I choose to make of it. To say that Italian Americans share a common culture and thus a common identity completely overlooks the diversity to be found across generations in any aggregate of Americans of Italian descent. A variety of factors and forces have shaped the ethnic psyche. In a timely and possibly path-breaking article, Edith Blicksilver examines the notion that the immigrant ethnic psyche was unique, a product of experiences that only the immigrants had. These experiences include the process of uprooting, the arduous journey, the contrast between the expectations and reality of living in the host country. Many of us like to think that ethnicity is some kind of unspecified compound composed of a resistant residue of Old Country values overlaid with New Country conditions. Blicksilver sets aside this amorphous image and talks about an

adaptation process that was not without conflict and full of unresolved elements. This kind of adaptation process, Blicksilver suggests, "can result in an identity crisis as the individual seeks to find his role as both an American and as an ethnic."[10] By extending this argument to include the children of the immigrants, and perhaps succeeding generations, we can see that the unresolved identity crisis of the immigrants has been carried over to the present day. Our current interest in ethnic identity, therefore, is a continuation of an exploration that had its origins in the immigrant generation. In the Italian case I would suggest that we have inherited the dilemmas of the immigrant generation and that a better understanding of the Italian immigrant psyche in all of its manifestations will lead to a clearer, less stressful, and more confident ethnic identity.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a bibliography and analysis of this material, see M. La Sorte. La Merica, Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience. Temple University Press, 1985.
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3. R. Vecoli. "The Coming of Age of the Italian Americans: 1945-1974," Ethnicity, 5 (1978), 136.
4. G. Prezzolini. I trapiantati. Milano, 1963, 452.
5. D. Siciliani. Fra gli Italiani degli Stati Uniti d'America. Roma, 1922, 32.
6. D. Carito. Nella terra di Washington: le mie visione della psiche Nord Americana. Napoli, 1912, 104.
7. A. Margariti. America! America! Salerno, 1980, 9.
8. C. Cianfarra. Diario di un emigrante. New York, 1900, 100.
9. W. Murray. Italy: The Fatal Gift. New York, 1982, 20.
10. E. Blicksilver. "The Immigrant Ethnic Psyche: Experiencing Literature through an Historical and Literary Interdisciplinary Approach," Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences, 29 (1983), 137.